

Council

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tried to ignore it and be the bigger person. But some (comments) could get under my skin," Daisane told the Times in May. "Many times someone would yell and say, 'You're not welcome here' when I was trying to door-knock."

Daisane endured the insults because he wanted a platform where he could help provide more housing and transportation options in the city.

"Before I ran, I was an activist, advocating for different groups in the community," he said. "My platform was entirely about housing, homelessness in our area, low-income families who are struggling."

Daisane was one of five candidates running for three at-large seats. He didn't make the cut — but is hoping someday he will be able to serve.

"I was very moved (by) how many people reached out and came out to vote with just five months of campaigning. It was a good indication that there were a lot of people who were very interested in what I had to say," Daisane said. "Hopefully my community will be ready when I am ready to come back."

Had Daisane been elected, he would have been an outlier — a person of color on a council whose members have been historically white, and a person who was just shy of age 30 at the time.

Do winners match constituents?

The Times sent demographic surveys to members of St. Cloud-area city councils, school boards, county boards and state bodies in April. It asked basic demographic questions such as gender, age and race, as well as other questions about political ideology, sexuality, household income, criminal background and religion.

The unscientific survey represents only a snapshot in time — insufficient in capturing people's collective experiences — but provides insight on who our leaders are and the things that influence their perceptions.

It also shows whether the makeup of elected bodies reflect the makeup of their constituents. Experts say that matters.

The surveys show the St. Cloud City Council follows the trend of many other



Abdi Daisane, a Somali-American business owner, ran for one of three at-large seats, but didn't make the cut.



Council President Jeff Goerger was first elected to the council in 2005.

PHOTOS BY ZACH DWYER/ST. CLOUD TIMES

elected boards in the area, skewing more male, more white and older than the community it serves.

In St. Cloud, women make up about half of the residents. But only one of seven council members — about 14% — is a woman.

Two of the seven members are veterans. Of the seven members, three are retired, two work full-time, one is self-employed and one member didn't respond.

Two council members listed household incomes of \$50,000-\$100,000, two listed household incomes of \$100,000-\$200,000, one listed a household income of more than \$200,000 and two didn't respond.

Five of the seven members said they were religious; the four members who listed their religion listed a Christian denomination; the other two members did not answer that question.

Members are older and less racially diverse than St. Cloud residents: 77% of residents are white and 100% of council members are white. And about 30% of residents are 50 or older, whereas 100% of council members are 50 or older.

But often, with age comes experience.

Council President Jeff Goerger, who was first elected to the council in 2005,

has spent more than two decades serving on either the city's planning commission or council. He's also lived in the city for more than six decades.

Goerger said he was inspired by council members he met years ago who were working to build a domestic violence shelter in his neighborhood. He was impressed by how well they listened to residents and communicated with people.

"The neighborhood issues were always my main concerns, as well as fiscal issues," Goerger said of his priorities as a council member. "Now with the (COVID-19) epidemic, we've got some issues, and I think, especially now, experience is going to be really helpful."

"Is that the only factor to electing somebody? No, it's not," he continued. "I think new people can come in and do a really good job because of their own personal experiences in life."

When it comes to the makeup of the council, Goerger said "it's always kind of looked like it does."

"It's not up to me," he said. "I think it's good to have a good cross-section of the community involved in this. But people have to run and people have to get elected."

Goerger said he strives to listen to all sides of issues and makes himself avail-

able to constituents by phone or email.

"I'm open to anyone's ideas. I always have been," he said. "I'm willing to listen. I've had my mind changed on issues."

Realities vs. representation

Daisane moved to St. Cloud in 2013 to attend school. He started working with immigrant and low-income families.

"Working with different institutions helped me realize a lot of the needs in the community, and issues affecting low-income families in the area," he said. "And I was one of them a few years back."

Daisane grew up in a refugee camp in Kenya.

"I realized I had a lot of perspective there, growing up in a place where representation doesn't exist," he said. "I thought this would be a good place to engage and take part."

Daisane agreed with age comes insights and experiences — but said younger people also have perspective and fresh insights.

"You get tired of having the same group of people with the same ideas over and over again," he said. "For any society to move forward, it's important to have younger people for fresher ideas to come in every now and then, while also maintaining institutional knowledge and experience."

Daisane said he has no intention of running for office in the 2020 election, but is encouraging others to run.

"I haven't stopped doing community work. I've been involved since then," he said, noting he has served on the city's zoning board and St. Cloud Metro Bus board. He now serves on the city's Housing and Redevelopment Authority board.

Diversity is critical in an elected body, Daisane said, because it should be reflective of the people it represents. That's why he was willing to endure the scrutiny while campaigning four years ago.

"Obviously there are things you can't control when you are running — how you look or sound, or your faith," he said. "Those are identities you can't hide. But those are the reasons you are running."

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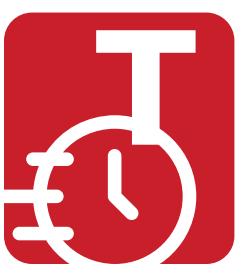
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